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IDENTITY, CONSUMPTION, AND THE HOME

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Despite a rich literature on the power dynamics of households within domestic space, the specificities of home consumption have been undertheorized within broader accounts of consumption and identity. Consumption frequently is conceptualized as a individualistic process, undertaken by a single self-reflexive actor. Focusing upon the purchasing, acquisition and display of furniture and other domestic goods, this article reflects upon the role of home consumption in identity construction within both individual households as well as different household groups. We argue that home consumption at times may be equally important to both individual and multiple households—despite conventional associations between homemaking and the nuclear family. Notions of the self may be dissipated in

collective provisioning by households consisting of couples, although fractures and conflict also may undermine general agreements about shared space. Both the making of the landscape inside the home and the narration of this making are ongoing projects undertaken within and through the diverse webs of relationship among individuals within a household.

INTRODUCTION

The central focus of this article is upon the articulation of identity through home consumption. Our main concern is to utilize the specific example of the purchase for and use of goods in the home in order to interrogate different understandings of the relationship between consumption and identity. Many contemporary sociological accounts have focused upon the creation of *self*-identity through consumption. Particularly in work which has foregrounded a late-twentieth-century displacement of identity formation from the sphere of production to that of consumption (Bauman 1998; Giddens 1991; Lash and Friedman 1996), emphasis is placed upon the ways in which men and women construct identities through individual consumption practices and habits. However, there also has been some suggestion that identity construction through consumption may not be entirely individualistic and self-directed: Carrier (1995: 15, emphasis added), for example, notes that ". . . where people shop and the ways they shop can be important for changing . . . things from impersonal commodities to possessions that embody the shopper's identity and location *in a web of personal relationships.*" Consumption therefore, is shaped at least in part through relationships with others. Our article's focus on home consumption provides a counter to portrayals which tend to overemphasize individual lifestyle or identity "choice" and offers the potential to shed light on the diverse ways in which consuming identities are constructed.

Through the article we conceptualize home consumption as the purchasing, acquisition, and display of furniture and other domestic goods.[1] We follow relatively recent understandings of consumption as "a social process whereby people relate to goods and artefacts in complex ways, transforming their meaning as they incorporate them in their lives through successive cycles of use and reuse" (Jackson and Holbrook 1995: 1914; see also Pred 1996). "Home consumption" therefore extends beyond simply initial decisions about new furniture acquisition: we use the term to encompass the range of ways in which women and men obtain and use furnishings in the home. In contrast to clothes and food, which articulate closely with an individual body, furniture and furnishings are distinctive in that their acquisition culminates in the production of the domestic interior. Thus, home consumption is particularly interesting because of its specific context: domestic space.

Across a range of disciplines—including anthropology, sociology, geography, social history, and design history—many writers increasingly have emphasized the complex entanglements of domesticity within Western households (Chapman and Hockey, 1999; Cieraad, 1999; Dowling and Pratt 1993; Madigan and Munro 1996; Putnam and Newton 1990). Yet despite a rich literature on the power dynamics of households within domestic space, the specificities of *home* consumption have been undertheorized within broader accounts of consumption and identity. Consumption frequently continues to be conceptualized as an individualistic process, undertaken by a single, self-reflexive actor (see also Gronow and Warde 2001: 2; Shove and Warde 2002: 234–5).

Our central intent in this article is to contribute to understandings of the complex dynamics of consumption practices within the home. As Valentine (1999: 492) has argued in relation to research on domestic food consumption, "[the home] is a site of individual, but also collective (household or 'family') consumption, where the goods purchased and the meanings and uses ascribed to them are negotiated, and sometimes contested, between household members." In summarizing contributions to an edited collection on the material culture of the home, Miller (2001: 4) similarly reflects: "the private [is] more a turbulent sea of constant negotiation rather than simply some haven for the self." Below, we illuminate the complexities of home consumption within domestic spaces which may be shared, negotiated and contested. We consider the extent to which notions of the self might be dissipated when family members engage in collective provisioning, and reflect upon negotiated arrangements amongst households which may not always be made up of heterosexual couples or nuclear families.

Throughout, we seek to emphasize the "work" of consumption involved in the ongoing creation and re-creation of identity (Miller 1991). Additionally, as Miller (1998: 146–7) has argued, the inalienability of commodities results from the object becoming part of personification through the act of consumption:

> if persons and relationships become the primary medium through which we achieve a sense of the transcendent or the inalienable, then in turn any objects which express persons or relationships become the vehicle for expressing these higher values. Ironically then, it is the alienable commodity that in our society becomes the mode of realizing, through a process of subjectification, our imagination of the inalienable.

This allows Miller to stress that specific goods need not directly "symbolize persons or identity. Shopping is an active praxis which intervenes and constitutes as well as referring back to relationships" (1998: 147). Home consumption practices thus may not be simply reflective of an individual consuming self, but also have the potential to mold relationships between individuals in the home.

The article draws upon material from a project examining the dynamics of the home furnishings commodity chain in the United Kingdom and Canada. The work was influenced by arguments about connections between sites through which commodities move: as Fine and Leopold (1993: 15) have indicated, "commodities are socially constructed not only in their meaning but also in the material practices by which they are produced, distributed and ultimately consumed." The empirical study conducted between 1997 and 2001 included interviews with furniture manufacturers, retailers, designers, magazine editors, and consumers, although in this article we focus upon discussions with consumers. Consumer interviewees were obtained primarily via networks which originated from retailers, including a snowball sampling technique and personal contacts. A specific interest in retailers and manufacturers which emphasized innovative styling, materials, and production techniques led us to pursue consumers who had dealings with "design-led" retailers. At least in part as a result, interviewees were predominantly middle-class to upper middle-class urban dwellers.[2] Further, although we originally had anticipated that national variation in home consumption practices might be of greater import, we ultimately could discern no noticeable differences in the ways in which Canadian and British interviewees reflected upon the relationship between home consumption and identity construction.[3] Interviews were open-ended, unstructured, and highly conversational; and discussions also involved informal tours of the home.

We begin by considering theoretical tensions within prevalent accounts of consumption and identity at a general level, before turning to reflect upon the specific case of the home and home consumption. The remainder of the article underscores the making of homes both by individuals as well as by couples; the ways that a range of household groups interact through material objects in the home; and the ways in which the formation and dissolution of households shape the nature of consumption practices in the home. Following Miller *et al.* (1998: 24), we emphasize how individuals "narrate their identities" through home consumption, "rather than simply inferring [their] identities from the purchases they make." This is a particularly important strategy given the historic importance of discourses surrounding home*making*. That is, the project of constructing identity in and through the home is an ongoing process, in which individuals and households "*actively try out* different sides of the self" (Löfgren 1990: 32, emphasis added).

CONSUMPTION AND IDENTITY

Much contemporary discussion of identity formation in late modernity has taken cues from authors such as Giddens (1991, 1992) and Beck (1992), who have foregrounded the reflexive making of the self. Although not specifically directed towards the relationship between consumption and identity, the implication of such work is that the construction of the self depends at least in part upon the choices that we make as

consumers (Slater 1997: 91). As Slater argues, a reflexive project "involves unremitting self-monitoring, self-scrutiny, planning and ordering of all elements of our lives, appearances and performances in order to marshal them into a coherent narrative." Thus, not only are we required to choose between different types of selves, but also the "post-traditional world" requires that we "constitute ourselves as a self who chooses, a consumer" (Slater 1997: 91). In a detraditionalized and individualized world, individuals expect (and are expected to) focus much more specifically upon their own project of self-identity.

For some authors, this direction of attention towards the individual self is said to imply a significant reworking of relationships and indeed of love itself (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens, 1992). Giddens (1992: 58), for example, suggests that in contrast to older variants of romantic love, a "pure relationship" now involves

> a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it.

Yet as Miller (1998) has suggested, Giddens' (1992) portrayal of individualized, self-directed practice (which may include the practice of consumption) in fact sits uneasily with the argument that relationships between couples increasingly involve negotiation and explicit dialogue. Miller questions how two apparently "self-directed" partners can "participate in a relationship which may demand not only considerable compromise but also the subsumption and to a degree the elimination of that same individuality" (1998: 119).

Miller's (1998: 123) own resolution of this contradiction is to indicate that in routine shopping for clothing and household goods (predominantly conducted by women), individuality tends to be sacrificed for devotion to another. Shopping is not an individualistic or individualizing act, tied to the subjectivity of the shopper. Rather it

> is dominated by your imagination of others, of what they desire of you and their response to you; it is about relationship to those who require something of you. Often these are relationships of devotion, mainly routine devotion, that may be deep or may be superficial, and are mainly taken for granted . . . (Miller 1998: 3–4).

Consumers do not merely buy goods for others, but aim to influence others to become the kind of person who desires the items being purchased: "buying goods is often as much about others in the family as it is about the shopper, especially for women" (Miller *et al.* 1998: 17). This suggests to Miller (1998: 122–3) that in contrast to Giddens'

(1992) emphasis on a more "democratic" confluent love, shopping in north London, at least (see also Clarke 2001) reveals the dominance of agapic love, or the loss of self through merging with a beloved other.

Rather than pursue further Miller's (1998) account of the direct role of love and relationships within domestic consumption practices, we wish instead to foreground a remaining theoretical tangle within existing discussions of consumption and identity formation: the tension—and indeed slippage—between considerations of the formation of (individual) self-identity and the shaping of (collective) household identity. Bourdieu's (1984) work, for example, is derived from responses by individuals, although it is sometimes invoked in discussions which seek to investigate patterns of household consumption more broadly. Studies such as Lunt and Livingstone's also amalgamate analyses of "the meanings of personal *and* domestic objects" (1992: 64, emphasis added). While Löfgren argues that "homemaking has become very closely related to identity formation," he is also concerned to situate homemaking within the emergence of a "*family* project," in which "the family is constantly being repaired and renovated" (1990: 32).

There remains a question as to how we might understand and represent the diversity of engagement with home consumption practices, both within and among households. Are there potential tensions between individually directed and "family"-oriented home consumption? Further, if consuming goods for the home is always seen to be tied to the idea of producing and sustaining the family, how might we conceptualize the "consuming interests" of single-person households? For Miller (1998: 121), provisioning by single women is not viewed as individualistic, but rather single women are seen to be consuming "almost always with an eye to the imagination and the potential of another." Their "shopping is directed to the household itself that simply happens, for the moment, to have only one person in it" (1998: 121)

Although we are drawn to some elements of Miller's (1998) emphasis on the construction of relationships through consumption and shopping practices, we have some concerns about his representation of provisioning by single women, which appears to represent an overly conservative view of household formation. Similarly, whilst Johnson (1996: 461) emphasizes married Australian women's "active practising of place" through the construction of the domestic environment, we would like to recuperate aspirations for "a home of one's own" from traditional associations of homemaking with the heterosexual nuclear family. Below, we consider the consuming identities of a range of different types of household.

HOME CONSUMPTION: THE HOME AND IDENTITY

Furniture and household goods are centrally involved in the construction of something called "home" (Cieraad 1999; Miller 2001). Rather than simply a commodity consumed within the home, furniture is the home. Seeley *et al.*, for example, have argued that furniture should be

seen as the most important element in individual understandings of home: "it is really the moveables which create the air of homeliness, and which are psychologically immoveable, rather than the physically rooted house" (1956: 58). A furniture designer interviewed for our research similarly noted that

> people seem to be a little bit more complacent I think about architecture . . . they have their apartment and it might not be the one they really want, or they have their house and it might not be the one they really want, but they can kind of realize what they want through the furniture . . . you can also change it . . . more easily. It's much more personal . . .You can take the furniture you have and make a new setting . . . I think we tend to build a profile of ourselves through the furniture that we buy.

There are multiple connections between consuming bodies in the space of the home. Furniture consumption frequently is negotiated between individuals and can come to embody shared and negotiated identity. Furniture is tactile as well as visual, and items such as sofas and beds may be explicitly tied to notions of shared intimacy in the home. This means that disentangling—or at least recognizing a multiplicity of—subjectivities in the home is a difficult task. As de Grazia (1996: 8–9) notes, the subject has not attracted a good deal of attention:

> . . . [the] process of negotiation among persons with an affective as well as a material stake in this joint enterprise—usually wife and husband, but also older and younger generations—is as yet little explored, though it would seem to shape profoundly what kinds of goods are purchased, what services are delegated to or re-appropriated from the market, and what values are attached to goods in the pursuit of family well-being.

Within Western households consisting of couples, the notion of home as a shared project leading to the construction of a shared identity has carried a strong weight. In the UK in the 1950s, DIY became an essential part of homemaking: young couples forming households in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War sought expression through home decoration and design. Manufacturers often exploited the notion of DIY as a collective project in their advertising. Dulux, for example, shifted away from the promotion of the product—a tin of paint which had the weight of the manufacturer's expertise behind it—to portraying young couples painting together (BBC2 1997; see also MacDonald and Porter 1990). Through the latter part of the twentieth century, the purchase of furniture was seen to be the responsibility of a female consumer, and the notion of homemaking remained highly gendered (Madigan *et al*. 1990), but the final outcome of home consumption was meant to represent a collective identity. These idealized

notions about negotiated decision-making amongst heterosexual partners and about the creation of "shared" space have been remarkably persistent within Western cultures, leading to pressures on households to portray homemaking as a joint undertaking. In practice, however, the idea of "negotiation" "may create a misleading impression, as [. . .] differing rationales may be accommodated in a shared result" (Putnam 1999: 148). What may be represented as a collective consuming identity may in fact be the outcome of changing divisions of homemaking labor and/or shifting individual investments in home consumption.[4]

Heterogeneous engagements with home consumption in the twenty-first century undoubtedly have been shaped by changing patterns of household formation (and dissolution). Much previous work on the home and domestic space broadly has taken heterosexual, nuclear family households as its focus (see, for example, Madigan and Munro 1996; Munro and Madigan 1999; Parr 1999b; Pratt 1981; Shove 1999). Although heterosexual couples formed the largest subgroup, the marital status and sexuality of our interviewees was not entirely uniform. Further, interviewees often had engaged in a series of homemaking exercises, as personal circumstances changed. In order to unravel stories of home consumption, we begin by considering the extent to which our interviewees viewed the home as reflective of individual identity. We then consider respondents' constructions of collective identity within shared domestic spaces. Transitions in household formation—and concomitant transformations in home consumption activities—are addressed in the final section of the article.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND THE HOME

Our interviewees' narratives begin with the example of a single woman, Chloe, who is in her mid-twenties and works as a retail manager.[5] At the time we spoke to her, Chloe lived in a two-bedroom rented shared flat and was preparing to move to a rented shared house. This move would involve a number of pieces of furniture and accessories—Chloe was particularly enthusiastic about design and style in the home. She typically obtained furniture by having it made for her by her father but frequently researched the furniture market for ideas to be copied, using shops and magazines as browsing spaces to develop a knowledge of styles. She also drew upon knowledge of contemporary design acquired through a general interest in art and design and an educational background in practical art and design history. In purchasing and acquiring goods for the home, Chloe combined a relatively minimal style with simple individual pieces. Her look involved a mix of contemporary and retro styles, with accessories from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s chosen for a more "classic" and "timeless" feel rather than as distinctively "period" pieces. Through changes in residence, and despite sharing a home with one or more other people, Chloe emphasized the development of a distinctive individual style through home consumption. Contrary to Miller's (1998) claim that single women's provisioning represents

a way to refuse rather than maintain individualism, Chloe did not view her experiences and practices as purely transitory or temporary, nor influenced by the desire for a partner.

Sarah, a single mid-forties charity organization worker, described her two-bedroom inner-city early Edwardian terrace as having a "vaguely cottagy feel." In both this and previous houses she had sought to "decorate to its age," although a number of elements—including a turquoise and gold cabinet hiding the television and stereo and a collection of 1950s plastic radios—contributed to an eclectic, rather than a definitively period style. Sarah emphasized the importance of defining (individual) identity at home in response to uniform and bureaucratic styling at work:

> I think perhaps particularly now also because you . . . workplaces are becoming more and more the same; you walk into any office building now and they've all got fake maple desks or Formica top type of desks, they're all sitting in the same chairs. And it's . . . the days of finding bits of furniture like that [pointing to a roll-top chest] in offices is . . . just wouldn't happen. And with things like hot-desking where you don't even have a desk to call your own, I suppose having an identity in your own home becomes all that much more important because you're running out of places that you can use to extend your identity. I think it's really important for people to be able to make that statement. This is me.

In furnishing and maintaining her home, Sarah's attention was not directed towards the imagination of another—a greater influence appeared to be changes and disruptions at work. Having had to move jobs several times following a period of local government restructuring, Sarah's current homemaking activities appeared more closely bound up with the creation of a stable, calm non-work environment. Her prized roll-top desk in fact had been salvaged from a prior local authority employer following an office reshuffle. Here, the creation and narration of individual identity in the home was in part inflected by activities and pursuits outside the domestic sphere.[6]

Even when their homes were furnished with pieces handed down from other family members, interviewees often stressed that the overall "feeling" of the home strongly reflected their individual identity. Mario, a single, forty-something male living in a late-Victorian house, emphasized in response to a question about inherited furniture: "no it's not [my parents' and grandparents'] identity. No I think it really is mine. It's my stamp of who I am by looking around." Like Sarah, Mario also was enthusiastic about purchasing period antiques, again because they were seen to "go with the character of the house, the neighbourhood." For certain households, at certain moments, individual identity construction may reach beyond the immediate confines of the home,

with decisions about interior and exterior (including the local neighborhood) intricately entwined.

Thirty-something Barbara lived in a developer-converted city center "loft" apartment and also had decorated her home with a variety of gifts and acquisitions from other family members and friends. Keen on scanning home interiors magazines, Barbara was enthusiastic about colorful, modern pieces as well as a table inherited from an aunt who had died. The table originally formed part of a set that Barbara described as "almost look[ing] like a Japanese or a Chinese type of table look which is really in style now too." She was "destroyed" that she had given away the other two tables prior to her move to the loft. Barbara noted that although her mother occasionally purchased small items of furniture for her,

> I come in here and it's just me for sure. And I think when my mum buys things for me, she knows my taste. Like she would buy those [a different group of] tables, she would buy them for herself. She knows my taste.

The activity and creativity which is seen to be a part of homemaking is such that even if goods have a provenance which is not necessarily a direct purchase by the owner, individuals see their own style reflected in objects.

Recent changes in the nature of furniture retailing away from the matched three-piece suite towards a more eclectic (albeit carefully styled) format often have presented consumers with distinctive "lifestyle" settings (Leslie and Reimer 2003a, b). Paul, who lived in a shared rented flat with an artist and a financial investor, was particularly scathing about the extent to which the Canadian mass-market furnishing/clothing/homeware retailer Caban (Figure 1; see also www.caban.com) sought to market a uniform, prepackaged lifestyle to consumers. Although both he and his male flatmates had purchased pieces from both Caban and Ikea for reasons of economy, he preferred buying what he described as "vintage" furniture from second-hand shops:

> people that aren't artists [. . .] maybe they'd want something that, maybe they're not conscious of trends and how people are buying stuff from Ikea everyday and buying stuff from Caban and now that's popular with people. Everyone's doing it, right? But I'm way too conscious of that I guess just being an artist like I think about that all the time and I hate it. Like don't want to have anything to do with Ikea or Caban even though I bought this stuff.

With a relatively new career in an animation studio following art college, Paul's living arrangements predominantly reflected financial

Figure 1
Caban (Granville Street, Vancouver, Canada). *Source:* Suzanne Reimer.

circumstances as well as age. At a particular stage of life, it was important for Paul to reiterate a sharply distinctive (artistic) individuality in part through a refusal to identify with mass-produced furniture. He emphasized the importance of creating an individual style in the home—even as he "admitted" to purchasing items from mass-market retailers.

SHARED SPACE

Narrating Shared Identities

Furniture has the potential to become a shared commodity within multiple-person households, arguably rendering questions of identity construction more complex than for other, more individualized, types of goods such as clothing or cars. We now turn specifically to focus upon joint provisioning strategies. Households consisting of couples often constructed apparently uniform narratives about the selection of goods. Married couple Gary and Jo could not even imagine a situation where they did not agree:

> Gary: I mean I can't honestly remember us ever when we first got married, me saying I like it this way, and you had better like it like that mate . . .
>
> Jo: there is no competition
>
> Gary: or you are not marrying me . . .

For women and men who present themselves as relatively egalitarian couples, it becomes important to emphasize a commonality of taste which in turn becomes a significant expression of their existence as a compatible couple in love (Miller 1998: 27). Thus it is sometimes difficult to unpack potential differentiations between individually directed and family-oriented home consumption:

> we both tend to like the same things so I suppose we are lucky that way. [. . .] rather than [. . .] one of us being minimalist and the other being a Laura Ashley freak . . . But I suppose when you first look at the house this is a house that is a combination of two people's ideas . . . (Jill, married)

Fifty-something Carol and Andrew lived in a medium-sized detached house in a suburban neighborhood. Within the last five years, they had switched the location of the kitchen and dining room as well as extensively remodeling the master bedroom and ensuite bathroom. Their furnishing style falls somewhere between the "contemporary" and the "traditional"—they are aware of current trends but are most concerned about comfort and "fit" of their furniture. Our discussions during the interview primarily revolved around the couple's shared furniture, rather than any furniture purchased during each of their previous marriages. Emphasis frequently was placed on the egalitarian processes of shopping for furniture:

> Carol: we do it together. Yes.
>
> Andrew: yeah, we do. That might be unusual, I don't know.
>
> Carol: I don't know . . . I guess Tim and Sue, our friends, they do stuff together too, although Tim will defer to Sue because he thinks she has more decorating style than he does. I don't know about that . . . but . . . we do go together. Sometimes we'll end up with Andrew's choice, sometimes we'll end up with my choice. Most cases . . . I don't recall a time when we couldn't compromise, one way or the other. That one was so strong that it had to be this. I don't think that happens very often.

Carol and Andrew strive to narrate home consumption as a truly shared practice, in which individual self-identities are subsumed within a representation of collective experience.

For fifty-something office worker Lucy, joint decision-making was emphasized within the discussion of a previous relationship. At the time of interview, Lucy lived in a two-bedroom flat in an outer-city neighborhood, having moved several times following her separation from her husband Mark.

> When we first got married [in the 1970s] there was a lot of that blonde furniture around. And we really didn't like it and then

> we found the Vilas maple and it was warm, it was a warm colour.[7] [. . .] And yeah it was fun, so we did buy it together. We both liked it. We would always go shopping [together] except for my twenty-fourth birthday, Mark bought a piece, a chest on chest for the bedroom and there was a present in every drawer (laughter). So you see there were good times! Twenty-four red roses and then a present in every drawer (laughter). Eight drawers or something . . . Because it was something that we'd wanted, this chest on chest, we'd looked at it and as I say we had the catalogue and we'd always be looking over the catalogue, oh what should we get next and you know look at this and isn't that nice and we'd have the approximate value and the price, the retail price for it, so then he surprised me with that.

Within the same story not only do we hear about shared tastes in color and style, and about the enjoyment of choosing furniture together, but also we are told about a particular chest of drawers which became a surprise birthday gift. Even as an individual gift, however, the chest is represented as something "we'd wanted." The importance of compatible homemaking through joint purchase is stressed, albeit within the context of a relationship which had broken down.

Susan, a married insurance clerk in her late thirties, recounted a tale which shifted between individual choice and notions of "compromise:"

> I've probably got the ultimate say at the very end (laughing), but we both look. My husband, he likes to shop too. He goes through all the shops and at the end of the day when it came to the final decision of, well we each got a chair, so he got to pick what kind of a chair he wanted and I got the over-stuffed chair. [. . .] But we both . . .I think in the long run I got the final say, but he was in the decision process (laughter). Because I would have pouted if I didn't get it! Cause he's not happy with the couches. I mean because we just downsized and we're in a smaller house. We bought the couch just after we moved and he swore it was too big and probably is, but I don't care, I like it, it stays.

Thus the articulation of compromise does occasionally stray from a more positively inflected situation of negotiated decision-making to the narration of a process which is somewhat more conflictual. Another married interviewee commented that: "You know for good or bad . . . if you are living with somebody else in the same house, you can't do what you both want and sometimes you have to compromise. You might not go for the first thing you thought of. You might go for the sixth thing you thought of because your partner prefers to look at that." Susan, quoted above, noted that her husband could "pick what kind of electronic stuff that goes in the house, because I don't really care; as long as I know how to turn it on, it's OK." This suggests that although couples might

come to general agreement about shared space, self-identities are not entirely suppressed in collective home provisioning. That is, despite cultural pressures to "subsume differences in a joint life project" (Putnam 1999: 148), there may be moments when one household member might relinquish their own preferences to another's tastes. We now want to foreground ambiguities and inconsistencies contained within the household as a "consuming unit" by examining a number of cases of conflict and tension.

Fractures, Conflict, and Tension

Fractures in collective identity are particularly visible in interviewees' discussions when narratives drift between choices made by "I" and "we:"

> [. . .] in general *we* buy what we like, so *we* see something, for instance these chairs here (Florence Knoll upholstered) [. . .] And *I* was in Martin's store one day and *I* saw that chair and *I* loved it—like you know *I* said *I'll* have that chair (emphasis added).

Jack and Sue lived in a suburban bungalow which they had extensively refurbished in a distinctly international modern style. Through the interview, Jack made numerous references to the influences of Sue's academic background in art history and design—as well as her Italian family "heritage"—on their joint furniture purchases and general style in the home. Although their shopping often was done together, it is notable that in the above example, Jack appeared to have made the decision on his own.

Sarah, the charity worker described previously, was explicitly reflective about the complexities of joint decision-making:

> I think when you're living with somebody, there is this sort of negotiation and compromise that goes on, and I think it's quite important that you can agree. 'Cause I have had friends who haven't been able to . . . sort of very, very different tastes, and they've ended up going down the route, right you can do that room and I will do that room (laughing). So that they both feel that they've had a chance to have their tastes expressed. But there's always a lot of slagging off that goes on! Oh, YOU chose that, didn't you . . . that kind of thing. Which I suppose must be . . . not having been a situation of violently disagreeing with somebody, you know I've never had to live with something that I object to. But . . . I can see that it could be quite annoying. It must be very difficult in something like a living room. Where you both spend a great deal of time, coming to an agreement on what that's going to look like if you've both got different tastes, must be a nightmare. Either that or you end up with a space that nobody's happy with.

Here Sarah reads others' experiences as being markedly different from her own. Conflict between members of a compatible couple was not something with which she felt familiar. Although recently separated from a female partner, they had together enjoyed spending considerable time refurbishing a five-bedroom early-Victorian townhouse in period style. Fractures in her own story emerged later on in the conversation, when Sarah indicated that she "quite enjoyed taking a break from the relentless, we need something to go in that corner; really need something to match *that*." In her new house she took pleasure from having a distinct space of her own, decorating eclectically, and collecting pieces of furniture which were particularly important to her.

The home is not, of course, a singular uniform space, and interviewees often sought to claim different rooms or areas of the home as their "own." Recognizing such micro-geographies of domestic consumption is important, for as Shove (1999: 131) argues, "for the most part, analyses of housing routinely stop at the front door" and assume a coherent "household unit." Munro and Madigan (1999: 116) suggest that in practice there is often a sharp conflict between "the assumption of a shared, democratic family life [. . .] implicit in the physical design of houses, and the aspirations of those who have chosen to live in them." In the married household of Brian and Sophie, Brian noted that "the bedroom it's sort of her territory . . . I'm not allowed to keep any of my own stuff in the bedroom. If piles of books sit there too long, I find them in the hall eventually and that's just because the room is very small and I do have another part of the house where I can keep my own junk." Although Brian suggests that he finds the demarcation of space restrictive, it also is important to note that it is most often women who lack space of their own in the home. Madigan *et al*. (1990: 631–2) stress, for example, that while children in more affluent homes increasingly have individual rooms, "adults continue to share bedrooms and public space." They argue that "in one sense a woman controls the whole house; but in another she may feel she owns nothing personally but her side of the wardrobe" (Whitehorn 1987, cited in Madigan *et al*. 1990: 632). Many of the women Munro and Madigan (1999) interviewed also were required to suppress their own need for privacy in the face of pressures to maintain conventional values of the home as communal family "haven" (see also Hunt 1995).

Rather than home always being a uniform, shared project (Löfgren 1990), it can also be a site of contestation, even for couples who emphasize the shared project of homemaking, or stress that compromise between two people is necessary. Dave and Fiona lived in the top-floor flat of a vast detached house in an expensive residential neighborhood. They shared an interest in modern design and throughout most of the interview narrated their home furnishings style as an entirely collective project. Yet at one point during the discussion, when Dave was describing the sleek lines of their dining table with its intricate system of drop leaves, Fiona whispered into the tape recorder to

indicate that she was mystified by his obsession with the object—"it looks like my gran's!"

It is important to reiterate that shared households do not always and everywhere and at all stages of the life course consist of heterosexual couples. Thirty-something Dan, for example, highlighted conflicts over the type and arrangement of home possessions in a number of shared houses in which he had lived previously. In the first: "I think the one concession was that Patricia had a huge television. It was massive—like about 28 inches and she plonked that right in the middle of the room and I hate having televisions as the focus and I hate big tellies—that was horrid but is was a concession." Unequal power relations between individuals potentially can contribute to household conflict in such situations: in a second house, Dan noted that:

> the two women I moved in with they sort of had enough furniture for a room but I had lots of old bits of furniture people had given me and stuff so we moved in and it was unfurnished and I sort of said well can I put this here, can I put that there and everything was agreed democratically but then after a couple of weeks we had a huge row and I was accused of taking over: "it's your house; we don't feel we are part of it." Because it was completely my style, [. . .] they said I could do it . . . and then they just sort of hated it.

Inhabiting or occupying another person's furniture may be profoundly disorientating for those who have not had a say in the creation of space. Although Dan and his housemates had attempted to pursue a democratic decision-making process in furnishing collective living spaces, individual preferences ultimately dominated.

CHANGING ROOMS/CHANGING SPACES

In the final section of this article we consider how changes in living arrangements may rupture and transform the connections between identity and the home. Several stories of changed household circumstances have emerged in the discussions above, but we would now like to focus specifically on the ways in which people explained specific transformations in home consumption. Thirty-something David lived with a lodger in a terraced inner-city house which made strong use of very bold colors in both paint and furnishings. At the time of interview he worked for a children's charity, although he had studied architecture at university and continued to be an avid reader of design and architecture magazines. In another house, in a "previous life," David and his partner had been living with assorted chairs and a single futon:

> . . . but my partner at the time just kept moaning about the fact that every sort of chair is not very good for being like a sofa [. . .] so then I went out and said right, blow the credit cards

> and I am going to get this [. . .] and I got it ordered and thought brilliant and then sort of arranged for it to be delivered just after Christmas and then Simon split with me, . . . I got the sofa and no person to go on it so that was ridiculous, but it was done.

Particularly when purchased together, furniture often becomes intimately associated with a relationship. Although David enthusiastically had pursued the creation of a distinctive individual style on his own in his new home, he continued to view the relatively expensive sofa as a redundant purchase, which appeared to make the loss of his partner seem more acute.

A change in a relationship very often results in the reconstruction of home; destabilizing the collective "project" and sometimes necessitating a new round of consumption and/or changes in taste and style. Lucy, whose enthusiasm for maple furniture we have already encountered, had furnished the flat in which she now lived on her own with new furniture of relatively traditional styling. Items included striped green and cream sofas from a national department store, and a small round dining table and chairs of light wood with woven fabric seats. Her bedroom furniture consisted of a box spring divan and white fiberboard chests of drawers. In part because the flat had considerable built-in cupboard space in the front entrance hall and each of the two bedrooms, Lucy felt little need to purchase additional pieces of furniture. More importantly, perhaps, she had left all of the furniture from her previous relationship with her ex-husband and professed no longer to be concerned about issues of home decoration and style: "you can't get me out of a bicycle store, or an outdoor store, but furniture stores I have no desire to go in them." At the same time, she did reflect that she might have put more thought into the purchase of a small dining table:

> afterwards, I realised that I should have bought something with a leaf in it, but I didn't, because I could not, at that point in my life understand why I would ever want a large table again! (laughter) . . . Two people max. So that was a mistake, but you know, that was the time . . . the period I was in.

Attitudes towards home consumption inevitably will undergo potentially quite complex shifts through changing personal circumstances. When living with husband Mark, Lucy spent considerable time entertaining large groups of family and friends around a large multi-leaved dining table, but later wanted to disassociate herself from a distinctly "homemaking" period.[8] More recently, however, she had begun to think that her small dining table might be impractical for hosting a new set of friends.

Alice is in her mid-fifties and lives in a ground-floor two-bedroom flat in an city-center townhouse. At the time of interview she did not work, having had to take early retirement on ill health grounds. Her flat was

of modern design with pale kitchen cabinets and laminate flooring. Furniture discussed in the interview included several large ornate carved pieces—a sideboard, large wardrobe/cabinet, and table and chairs—of vaguely "colonial" style with wrought-iron fittings. When living in a large house in another city with her husband and daughters, Alice had enjoyed exploring antique shops, and the dark carved pieces were judged as "hers" following a divorce. In contrast to these pieces, Alice was not particularly enthusiastic about the 1960s Danish furniture which had been current at the time of her marriage:

> That wasn't my style. I sort of liked it at other people's places and I sort of looked at it, but when it came to my—to take the time for me to buy something, I didn't. We did have one piece [. . .] this long six-foot teak box with our stereo, radio and tape deck I guess in it. This massive thing was six feet long and had modern foot high legs and it was a brute to find a home for, let alone trying to move it around the room. It took up a whole wall, six feet is long, and then it was low, so we had pictures and things sitting on top of it, but that thing stayed with us for too many years and finally I was able to turf it. [. . .] Well, actually it was quite nice, it was very simple, but it was good teak and I took good care of it. It would certainly be an attractive piece for somebody who wanted that sort of thing, but I had it with me for 15 or 20 years and I was tired of it.

There are a number of important aspects to Alice's story, including the interesting shift between what "I" and "we" when referring to furniture purchased during her marriage. Alongside a general narrative of joint decision-making and collective home consumption, the story of divesting herself of a specific piece of furniture representative of a previous relationship also is prominent.

CONCLUSIONS

For Miller (1998: 141), "shopping is not about possessions per se, nor is it about identity per se. It is about obtaining goods, or imagining the possession and use of goods." Utilizing the notion of home consumption to encompass the arrangement, acquisition, disposal as well as purchase of domestic goods, we similarly have sought to emphasize the fluid and ongoing nature of consumption practices in the home. Illuminating the complexity and diversity of women's and men's engagements with homemaking helps us progress beyond a binary opposition between individual identity construction by a singular consumer and consumption which is oriented towards a family project. As Gullestad (1995: 319–20) notes: "the home is a rich, flexible and ambiguous symbol; it can simultaneously signify individual identity, family solidarity and a whole range of other values."

A key aim of this article has been to attempt to push further discussions of the relationship between ". . . people and the objects which . . . define the self" (Parr 1999a: 117). We have sought to move beyond generalized theorizations of the reflexive self in late modernity so favored by authors such as Giddens (1991, 1992) and Beck (1992) and yet at the same time to address the potentially collective nature of homemaking within shared households. With respect to Miller (1998), we would not wish to characterize individual homemaking aspirations as always and everywhere looking towards a nuclear family setting. Home consumption may not be closely equated with family formation or a shared domestic identity. As we have seen, home consumption and identity construction are connected in a range of ways and via a diversity of mechanisms. For lone householders, identity construction through home consumption can be important at certain times and places even though their domestic circumstances are not those of the traditional nuclear family. The forging of individual identity may be important as single men or women are beginning domestic life away from a parental home; or alternatively later in the life cycle following the dissolution of a shared household. For couples or shared householders, homemaking practices may at particular moments represent collective endeavors, whilst at other times one partner may invest more attention in the home project than the other. In some relationships there may be a drive toward self-expression, even at the same time that relationships themselves have become increasingly subject to dialogue and negotiation. Both the making of the landscape inside the home and the narration of this making are ongoing projects undertaken within and through the diverse webs of relationship among individuals within a household.

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NOTES

1. Although the broader study from which this article derives sought to focus specifically on furniture, our conversations with consumers frequently stretched to encompass decorative objects, artwork, and electrical goods.
2. Interviewees did differ across categories such as age, marital status, and sexuality (Leslie and Reimer 2003a: 295). Both homeowners and tenants were included in the study.
3. Quotations thus do not identify the nationality of consumers. We have reflected elsewhere upon potential national differences in consumer

attitudes to and awareness of environmental issues in furniture production (Reimer and Leslie 2004).
4. Thanks to one of the article's referees for emphasizing this point.
5. All names used in this article have been changed.
6. We are extremely grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging us to focus more carefully upon the nuances of conversations with Sarah and several other interviewees.
7. On the strong appeal of "maple as modern" to Canadian consumers, see Parr (1999b).
8. During her marriage to Mark, Lucy did also work full-time as a secretary.

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